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ABSTRACT

The internship program for undergraduate-level community health students at Slippery Rock University in Butler, Pennsylvania, is designed as a capstone experience bridging the gap from academia to practice. Students in the internship program spend 12 weeks during the summer of their senior year working in any health organization of their choice, provided their experience culminates in a major project that demonstrates entry-level professional skills such as planning health promotion education programs, program evaluation, and data management and reporting. The internship experience gives students the opportunity to apply the theory they have learned in classes and develop competencies through a work-related experience. During the internship experience, students submit weekly detailed work logs. The internship site supervisor evaluates their performance in the following areas: ability to develop effective relationships with staff; acceptance of supervision and constructive criticism; effective communication with clients and peers; and capacity to relate learning to new experiences. Students also complete a major project and write a project report based on a strict format. The internship experience has received high ratings from students and their worksite mentors and has given students hands-on experience and promoted their professional growth and job readiness. Several program graduates have found employment at their internship site. (MN)

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The Internship as a Capstone Experience: The Bridge from Academia to Practice

By: Don Gibala, PhD, and Wendy Stuhldreher, PhD, RD

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Bridging that gap from the classroom to work experience is a challenge for both professors and students. While students enthusiastically seek employment, too often the response from the professional world includes comments such as, "We are really looking for someone with experience." In addition, many health organizations are unaware of the qualifications of community health students.

What exactly is community health and what type of skills and abilities do our students possess? The Community Health Program provides the student with a multidisciplinary health focus emphasizing technology, scientific research, and advances in health care relevant to improving the health of individuals and communities.

The outcomes of the program include:

- **Effective Professional Communication**. Addresses oral and written communication skills and competence in basic multimedia technology.
- **Professional Competency Outcome**. Addresses the knowledge base from social, behavioral and natural science, education and health necessary to assess, plan, implement, evaluate and coordinate health promotion.
- **Professional Ethics**. Addresses ethical standards, legal issues, and multicultural sensitivity.
- **Continual Professional and Personal Development**. Addresses the need and desire for continuing education, advanced study, and participation in professional health organizations.

Community health undergraduate students enroll in a full-time, required 12-week internship during the summer of their senior year. Students may select any health organization in which to spend their internship, provided their experience culminates in a major project that demonstrates entry-level professional skills, such as program planning, health promotion education programs, program evaluation, and data management and reporting. The internship provides students the

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opportunity to apply the theory they have learned in classes, and to develop competencies through a work-related experience. .

The requirements for the internship experience are rigorous. Students submit a weekly log detailing all their work. Part of the log contains a section for the worksite supervisor to comment and identify the student's strengths and weaknesses. The internship site supervisor evaluates the intern's performance in several areas, such as:

- ability to develop effective working relationships with staff,
- acceptance of supervision and constructive criticism,
- effective communication with clients and peers, and
- capacity to relate learning to new experiences.

Students also contract with the agency supervisor and faculty internship advisor regarding a major project that will demonstrate that they have mastered the skills and abilities of an entry-level community health professional. Students write a report on their project, following strict criteria, that includes background literature on the problem, methodology describing how they developed and conducted their project, data analysis and/or results which must include tables and figures, summary and recommendations, and bibliographic citations.

As students progress academically through the Community Health Program, they are encouraged to join the Pennsylvania Public Health Association (PPHA) Collegiate Chapter. This provides another opportunity to become grounded in their profession, and to network with potential future employers and important players in the community health arena. Faculty members accompany students to the annual professional conference, another way to link academia and practice.

In 1997 the faculty decided to further enrich the students' experiences by conducting a mock professional conference for student interns, based on the PPHA conference model. Intern return to campus during the summer for a daylong conference during which they present their internship projects. Criteria for this conference follow the guidelines from the PPHA - students submit an abstract and make a 15-minute platform presentation about their project. Training interns to present their project in the allotted time while addressing key points forces them to learn to be succinct and choose words carefully, which enhances their communication skills. The internship conference has been a rewarding experience. Internship worksite supervisors are also invited to the conference.

This internship experience is the pinnacle of our students' academic experience, and proves to be an excellent segue into the work world. Several are fortunate enough to have the internship turn into an employment opportunity. It is a win-win opportunity - the student gets hands-on experience and the internship worksite supervisor gets another pair of hands. However, al this is only possible with dedicated mentors at the internship sites. They must be willing to devote time and energy into providing professional development for our interns.

Many of our worksite mentors testify to the value of our studetns, their professional growth and job readiness, and evaluations of our interns are very positive. Many of the worksite supervisors are recognized health professionals who remember and appreciate mentor in their own past; thus,

many of them feel that the passage of knowledge, wisdom, and experience to our students is a social-professional responsibility to be taken seriously.

As educators, we are responsible for giving college students a sound theoretical base in their chosen profession, with the hope of converting knowledge and critical thinking to applicable practice in the field. Our worksite mentors are critical links that help us take students from classroom theory to organizational practice - from the textbook learning to the accountabilities of actual work experiences.

Mentors remind us that our community health students are very successful at bridging this gap between theory and practice. Interns are accountable, proactive team members. They are quick to adapt to new environments and gain professionally from the internship experience. They bring group process, computer, and research skills to the table and are able decision-makers, adept at program development, implementation, and evaluation. Mentors advise us that students have benefited their organizations by filling manpower voids, offering cost savings, and providing program or project implementation. The addition of internships has also created positive changes in the structure and behavioral norms of many informal groups within the worksite environment. We are repeatedly told that our students have the basic tools of the trade when they enter their internships. Many have just not had the advantage of working in the health field prior to their internship. The internship experience offers this critical professional transition for students and establishes the necessary base for employment upon graduation.

A perfect example

Over the years, one site has consistently provided excellent and varied experiences for our interns - Community Health Challenge of S.W. Pennsylvania (CHC). Community Health Challenge is a regional non-profit organization that is a primary supporter of wellness programs throughout western Pennsylvania. CHC holds a 12-year tradition of working with and offereing its wellness programs and services to health care providers, businesses, industries, schools, social institutions, and community groups and organizations of all types that are interested in the development and implementation of wellness initiatives. The primary focus of CHC is on reduction of cardiovascular disease and an awareness of risk factors and unhealthy behaviors that are related to heart disease.

The table below lists the titles of student projects in recent years. Students have been provided with a wide variety of experiences ranging from data analysis to program evaluation, and many have become involved in community interventions targeted to citizens of all ages.

Title of Internship Projects in the SRU Community Health Program
Report to the Auditor General's Office on CVD Risk Factors over 3 Years
CVD Risk Factors Among Attendees at NAACP National Convention in Pittsburgh
Analysis of Cardiac Risk Data Among Veterans in Western Pennsylvania
Walking for Fitness Program – A Typical Action Plan
An Evaluation of a Walking Program for Clarion County Residents – Clarion County Walk for Wellness

Developmental Steps for a Diabetes Awareness Fund-raising Walk in Butler County
Profile of Cardiovascular Risk in the Mid-Mon Valley Region
Comparison of Healthy Lifestyle Behavioral Changes in Elderly Participants of Sustained Physical Activity Programs in Fayette and Butler Counties
Development of a Sustained Walking and Nutrition Program for College Students

Mentors for CHC students have provided steady, quality guidance throughout this experience - so much so that students in 1999 were able to submit abstracts to professional conferences. Key to this success is knowing when to lead and when to give the intern "wings." Students experience a wide variety of health promotion activities - from running health fairs and screenings, to evaluation of programs and providing report of outcomes of health promotion.

CHC has employed nine of our graduates since 1996. This employment opportunity has been a great entry-level experience from which these alumni have branched out into bigger and better employment experience - all because of the excellent foundation provided by CHC.

In summary, the internship experience is a valuable way to bridge the gap between academic preparation and employment. As part of our program evaluation, a survey of alumni found that 100% recommended mandatory internships as part of their academic experience. The improvements that were made in the internship experience have allowed our students to further develop their professional entry-level skills. In addition, our internships give Slippery Rock University positive visibility within the health community in general. We are very encouraged by the results of our student feedback and the comments from our internship site practitioners, and look forward to long-standing work affiliations with our alumni and collaborative partners.

Don Gibala is the Executive Director of Community Health Challenge of S.W. Pennsylvania Inc. in Butler, PA, and Assistant Professor at Slippery Rock University. Wendy Stuhldreher is Professor and Director of the Community Health Program at Slippery Rock University.

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